

# Letters to a Young Doctor

## Arranging for study leave

PHILIP RHODES

All doctors in the National Health Service have some entitlement to study leave. It is not strictly an entitlement, since pressing service duties to patients may cause the leave to be waived. Nevertheless, most employing authorities are generous in their interpretation of the regulations, which may be found in the *Terms and Conditions of Service for Hospital Medical and Dental Staff (England and Wales)*, revised in April 1981. All doctors on first appointment should receive a copy. Failing that, copies are kept in each postgraduate centre and in the administrative offices of each district. Study leave is dealt with in paragraphs 250 to 254. There are recommended standards for study leave for each grade, but since they might vary from time to time they are not given here. There is no substitute for looking at the original document.

Study leave may be given for day-release courses; for longer courses, either regional or national; and for private study. It may also be allowed for research, teaching, examining, or taking examinations. Its terms are therefore very wide. The intention clearly is to have a very well trained and educated cadre of doctors at all levels, on the assumption that they will give the best possible and improving service to patients. It should never be forgotten that these generous terms lay some obligations on the person who benefits by them. Nearly all the costs of study leave come out of public funds and are an investment in the doctor, who should therefore do his utmost to give a fair return on the investment. He will benefit by his study, but it is properly expected that it will benefit his patients or enable him to do better work in whatever field he has chosen.

### Plan in advance

It is important to plan study leave well in advance of the time it is to be taken. It should be part of your total programme of study, helping and reinforcing your personal work. Day-release courses should run together with the programme of written work. Block courses should come towards the end of the personal programme as a reinforcement. It is futile to expect that a short course of, say, a fortnight just before an examination is sufficient. Long, steady preparation and study leads to success. Cramming alone negates the importance of study. Passing examinations is important but not all-important. The intention of examinations is to make you cover a certain amount of ground so that you become a better, more thoughtful, more knowledgeable practitioner, of greater value than before to your patients or others whom you serve. The examination is a means to an end and should not be an end in itself.

Advanced courses and courses in special subjects may not be of immediate use for preparing for examinations. They tend to be of most interest to senior registrars and consultants, or to registrars who have obtained their higher diplomas and are embarking on a definite specialist career. They are not normally sanctioned for attendance by more junior doctors before obtaining a higher diploma.

The absence of a junior doctor on study leave, however long or short, has repercussions on the service. The consultant for whom you are working or the principal in general practice must be told of your plans well in advance. This should be followed up by a written statement to him so that you shall both know exactly what has been agreed. Your junior colleagues may have to carry out service duties for you. The ones who are concerned should also be clear about what you intend to do. They may feel sufficiently strongly that a locum should be employed during your absence. This means that the administration must agree and have enough time to get a locum. If they have to advertise it may take two or more weeks until an advertisement can be published in one of the medical journals, and then more time elapses while negotiations are carried on with suitable applicants. The clinical tutor must also know of your plans and may be asked to countersign your application so that he may be assured that the study leave is properly sanctioned. On the word and signatures of your consultant and clinical tutor the district administration have authority to pay your appropriate expenses.

You will see why it is important to arrange study leave in very good time. A sudden impulse to be away from service duty may throw many people into extremely difficult situations. A possible response is to refuse you permission to go on study leave. Another might be to refuse you expenses. It is even worse if you take time off and then hope to claim expenses retrospectively. Many authorities simply refuse all such retrospective applications, and you will then be out of pocket. Your lack of consideration will not do you much good with colleagues and consultants.

A further reason for arranging for study leave in good time is in case your consultant or clinical tutor refuse your request. You may then appeal to the study leave panel, which is set up by each regional health authority. The panel may not meet very frequently so there may be delay in hearing your appeal. The message about study leave is quite clear: act sensibly and in the spirit of the advice given and there will rarely be any difficulties; try to buck the system and you may be disappointed, leaving behind a series of unnecessarily impaired relationships.

Requests to go on study leave abroad at international congresses and conferences are rarely granted to registrars unless they are reading papers or contributing in some way to the meeting. The same may be true of senior registrars. All requests are dealt with on merit. Arrangements may vary from region to region but the study leave panel is usually the body to contact. Study leave may be granted without expenses or with expenses, usually up to a maximum, which may not be enough to pay for air fares to distant parts of the world as well as congress fees, subsistence, and other expenses.

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In applying for study leave and expenses there is usually a special form to be filled in. It may be obtained from the administration or the postgraduate centre. It is not just to be cursed as another form with much muttering about bureaucracy and red tape. It is in the nature of an aide-memoire for you, giving the nature of the meeting you wish to attend, travel expenses, subsistence, fees, and other expenses. Moreover, these details appear in an order that those who must sanction the leave can pick them out quickly. They have many applications to consider and should not be expected to sift your requirements out of a long-winded, diffuse letter. You must do it—and according to their requirements for ease of working—because you are the supplicant and you need to be courteous. Righteous indignation is rarely productive and is usually time-wasting.

The *Terms and Conditions of Service* have to be very general and cannot cover individual cases. Most study leave panels, therefore, publish guidelines on how the panels interpret the *Terms*. These are held in the postgraduate centre. You can therefore tailor your requests to attune with the suggestions made in the guidelines, which are not meant to be rigid. There will always be a few doctors whose requests do not fit exactly into the *Terms* or the guidelines. The study leave panel will consider such cases individually. When applicants conform with both documents, which is usually the case, then simple action locally is enough to ensure that study leave is granted as requested.

In the next few articles I shall discuss applying for jobs in the Health Service.

## MATERIA NON MEDICA

### Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité

It was a memorable honeymoon, especially as our arrival in Paris coincided with that of the Beaujolais Nouveau. Also my husband's wallet was stolen the next morning on the steps of Sacré-Coeur.

In the interests of accuracy, I have to say that we were each carrying equal shares of the family funds—but more about democracy later. For those of you who would like to know how the pickpockets did it, here are the instructions.

It's best if you're a ragamuffin between 10 and 12 years old, and have a friend of similar age and appearance to help you. Get yourself a large piece of cardboard and write things on it—anything will do. Go to a tourist spot such as Montmartre where you won't have to wait long for a likely customer. If possible, choose a mug who looks as if he hasn't bought travellers' cheques (perhaps because his wife said they were a rip-off). If you can see the outline of a bulging wallet in the pocket of his duffle-coat, so much the better. Wait till he has his arm around his companion. Then you can start.

Both of you must run up to him and beg simultaneously. You must paw him. He will try to brush you off, but pawing is absolutely essential. One of you thrusts the cardboard in front of him so that he has to look at it, and the other liberates his wallet. Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, remember? Once out of sight you share the money between you (Egalité). If there are any credit cards, take them home to your elder brother (Fraternité).

Our assailants followed this plan with total success, including the get-away. At the gendarmerie, we were shown a cell. "Is it any of these, monsieur?" Behind the bars were a dozen urchins in brightly coloured tatters, but our ragamuffins weren't among them. I wondered where they got this crowd and the policeman explained: "We pick zem off ze street in ze morning, but we 'ave to let zem go in ze evening. Too young to keep here at night." He gave a Gallic shrug.

We're not planning any more honeymoons.—CAROL COOPER, senior registrar in rheumatology, Harrow.

### "Oh, I'll tak the high road"

Earlier this year, a new appointment in Edinburgh necessitated several car journeys from Nottingham to Scotland. From Darlington the "low road" goes through the Tyne Tunnel and along the coast, while the "high road" strikes north-west through the Border hills. The latter rapidly became our favourite route. It is one of character, of changing moods and contrasts in the 120 miles between Darlington and Edinburgh. It begins quietly, shunning the industry around West Auckland and Shildon, but becomes bewildered at Tow Law. Where do the inhabitants work, and what do they do in the winter? Sadness creeps in at the sight of the derelict giant steel works at Consett, where once as we passed a thunderstorm was playing, raising echoes of *Götterdämmerung*.

Subdued, the road drops quietly to the Tyne Valley at Corbridge. We had coffee there early one morning and watched the sleepy Northumbrian market town come to life. Refreshed, the road now senses excitement. The Roman roadbuilders believed in straight lines

and disregarded contours. The resulting numerous blind summits imply danger, where dips in the road can hide oncoming traffic for several seconds. After dark, with the headlights pointing to the sky, the car seems about to plunge into a black abyss. Reaction, however, sets in and there is a sense of desolation on the moors around Otterburn with the dark conifers of the Kielder Forest marching away to the west. Natural optimism soon returns, with half the journey over, and the dramatic appearance of the red stone of Jedburgh Abbey, highlighted by the low spring sun, cheers you on your way. We spent a night at Pathhead and a walk down the old path to the Tyne Water at Ford enabled us to admire the symmetry and elegance of Telford's bridge, which is unsuspected from the road. As a parting gift the road takes you to the edge of the Border hills, says "Enough!" and, giving you a view of the Forth, expires gently into Dalkeith.

It is a road which has retained its integrity, responding sensitively to its environment instead of riding roughshod over it. Each journey has revealed fresh surprises. We are now settled in Edinburgh but if I had to do it all again, I'd "tak the high road" every time.—ALAN OGILVIE, senior registrar, Edinburgh.

### "With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes"

I can't offer any comment about bells on toes, but I have been thinking about rings on fingers recently, particularly the rings on the fingers of ladies of quality such as Eleanor of Castile in the thirteenth and subsequent centuries. My hypothesis is that members of the upper classes wore rings on their index fingers when they had their portraits painted as confirmation of their being above any form of manual work. The extent to which a ring on one's dominant index finger gets in the way in everyday life is exasperating beyond measure. One cannot test the validity of the opposite line of argument, because of course the labourers did not have their portraits painted, but in support of this one I marshal Elizabeth of York (d 1503), Catherine Parr (d 1548), and Mary I (d 1558) all sitting with stylised hand gestures in the National Portrait Gallery. Late ladies of the manor at country houses display a similar predilection as do the lady benefactresses and founders' wives of Oxbridge colleges. Denying the idea are the female members of Thomas More's family (1593, NPG), but no doubt they helped the servants as a matter of principle, and wouldn't have dreamt of assuming airs and graces for a sitting.

Eleanor of Castile deserves notice because she is supposed to have been the "fine lady upon a white horse" to see whom one rode to Banbury Cross. Eleanor died on 28 November 1290, at Harby in Nottinghamshire, and her embalmed body left Lincoln in a funeral procession on December 4 to be buried at Westminster on December 17, her heart being deposited in the church of the Dominicans. The *Dictionary of National Biography* spoils the nursery rhyme by saying that her widower, Edward I, erected crosses in her memory at Lincoln, Grantham, Stamford, Geddington, Northampton, Stony Stratford, Woburn, Dunstable, St Albans, Waltham, West-cheap, and Charing. If their map reader took them that far off the Great North Road, they may well have been to Banbury too!

Any interpretations of the ring on the thumb of Richard III?—VIRGINIA ALUN JONES, research SHO, Cambridge.